

Rowley and Ezekiel Rogers, The First North American Printing Press



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Ezekiel Rogers was born in Wetherfield, Essex in 1590. He graduated from Cambridge then became a chaplain before becoming assistant minister of St Peter's Church, Rowley, near the East Yorkshire village of Little Weighton in 1619. He was known as a fiery and forceful preacher and a strict puritan: although he remained at Rowley for seventeen years he became increasingly at odds with the Church of England hierarchy over religious doctrine in the 1630s and was finally suspended from his duties. He seems to have had a very strong following in the local community and elsewhere and when he proposed emigration to New England in North America, where he felt people would have more freedom to practice their religion as they saw fit, he was able to persuade twenty two families to follow him. New England was then frontier territory, the first permanent settlement there had been the Plymouth Colony in 1620 and many of New England's early settlers were English Protestants, fleeing religious persecution at home. In the early days they were very much engaged in the business of survival, of establishing homesteads and farms and making a living from the land and the neighbouring seas. During the rest of the 1620s and 1630s they were joined by many others wishing to worship as they saw fit and keen on establishing a new life in the New World.

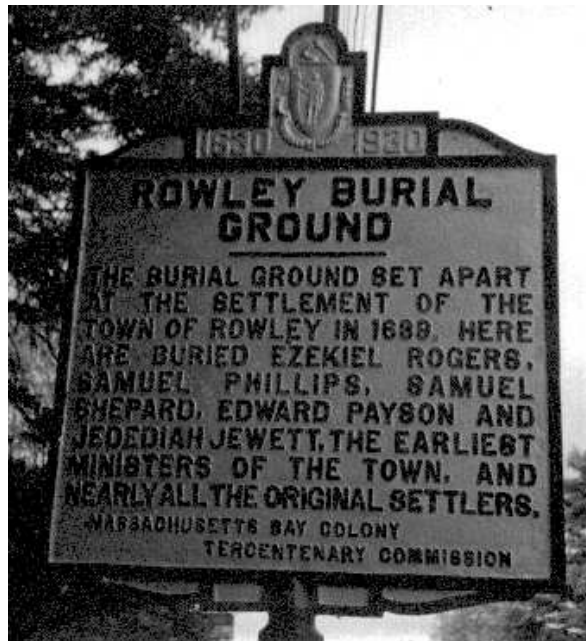
Ezekiel and his followers pooled their money to organise their New England passage. They left Rowley in the summer of 1638 and travelled down into Hull where they joined the ship *John of London*, lying in the Old Harbour on the River Hull. After sailing out of the Humber, their ship called into London en route and there picked up the Reverend Joseph Glover, a wealthy nonconformist minister, who brought with him Stephen Daye, a printer, and also what is believed to be North America's first printing press. Glover is thought to have first visited New England earlier in the 1630s and supported the foundation of Harvard College - which eventually became Harvard University, the oldest institute of higher education in the United States.

Unfortunately, on the long and tortuous journey across the Atlantic, the Reverend Glover died before the vessel reached Salem Bay, Massachusetts in the December of 1638. The migrants probably spent a long first winter in Salem but in spring 1639 Ezekiel Rogers and his followers moved on to land some six miles outside of Ipswich, Massachusetts. House lots and properties were laid out along the township's brook, allowing each family access to fresh water. Here the new arrivals built many houses and, bringing spinning and weaving skills with them from the East Riding of Yorkshire, they were amongst the first to establish a clothing industry in New England. They called their little township, Rowley after their East Riding village.



Rowley today: St. Peter's Church, Rowley, East Yorkshire
(source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rowley,_East_Riding_of_Yorkshire)

Rowley, Massachusetts retains its links with the East Riding village to this day. Meanwhile, Elizabeth Glover, continued with her late husband's mission and supervised Daye in the setting up of the Press in Cambridge, Massachusetts. In January 1639, the *Freeman's Oath* was the first piece printed. The following year, 1640, the press produced *The Bay Psalm Book*, the first book printed in the English colonies. This may also have been the first book to have been written in North America and is an important part of the history of print; it seems that only five original copies still exist.



Rowley Burial Ground
(source: <http://www.jowitt1.org.uk/>)

The small town of Rowley prospered and Ezekiel Rogers bequeathed his library to Harvard when he died in 1660 and other benefactions from him also eventually went to this learned institution. Early settlers in Rowley played an important part in the establishment of this new country. Elizabeth Glover married Henry Dunster, Harvard's First President, who had taken interest in the Press. Stephen Daye died in 1668. His son Matthew became an accomplished printer and indeed may have actually done much of the printing with that first press. Printing and publishing in the United States has certainly come a long way since Stephen Daye first sailed with the Rowley settlers back in the summer of 1638.

Robb Robinson, December 2008

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